

FEMINISM AND YOUTH CULTURE

From Jackie to Just Seventeen

Angela McRobbie



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Feminism and Youth Culture

From 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'

Angela McRobbie

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For Hanna

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Introduction

The essays in this collection have been written over a period of almost thirteen years. The first five pieces were all written during my time at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham and have appeared in a number of forms in some of the books and journals which were associated with the Birmingham Centre in the late 1970s. However many of these are now out of print and it seemed to me a useful project to make this work available in one volume. The concluding three essays mark a shift in my own personal geography from Birmingham to London, though they too bear the marks of that time and those intellectual influences which have come to be linked with the emergent field of cultural studies.

Three themes appear repeatedly in this context. The first of these refers to the terrain of *lived experience*, the second is concerned with *popular culture* and the third with *subcultures*. When I first became interested in the sociology of youth in the mid-1970s there was an impressive body of work emerging in that field which was influenced by radical deviancy theory and by that brand of Marxism which looked to culture and everyday life for signs of class conflict and resistance. Much of this work – by Taylor, Walton and Young, by Paul Willis, Simon Frith, and Paul Corrigan – converged on the question of how young people, including delinquents, football hooligans, drug-takers, music fans, or simply young stylists, ‘made sense’ of the situation within which they found themselves.¹ There was also that developing body of work which emphasised the structural constraints on the lives of young people, and there were the structuralist readings of the meanings created by working-class youth as they interacted with a number of goods and consumer items transforming them into symbolic statements about themselves.² Part of

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my early project was to shift this interest back to the living subjects themselves, to shift the emphasis away from an almost exclusive interest in boys, and to see how teenage girls interpreted some of the structural determinations of age, class, and gender in the context of their own lived experience.

Because the existing work spanned such a wide area and such a diverse set of interests, and because there was no equivalent work at that time which looked at young women or which highlighted gender, I was immediately faced with the difficult question of which aspect of female experience to concentrate on. A broad-based study of girls' culture in the context of the school, the home and leisure would run the risk of being so general as to tell us little more than what we already knew from common sense. The alternative was to set up a small-scale study of a self-defined set of young girls who came together through some shared interest in music, in drugs, or in a particular style or subculture.

As it transpired I opted for a more general study which would act as a kind of response or reply to Paul Willis's influential *Learning to Labour* but which was less ambitious in scale.³ This allowed me to concentrate on the dynamics of class and gender and on the way these two factors came together in the day-to-day lives of a small group of girls living in the same estate in south Birmingham. It may well be that the merit of this small scale and perhaps clumsily ethnographic study was that it had not been done before. In the past, where groups of teenage girls had for some reason come under the scrutiny of social researchers, it had been under the guise of some specific 'concern' often articulated by a number of self-appointed moral guardians who then went on to problematise these girls for failing to adhere to a narrowly middle-class notion of 'ladylike behaviour'. (Pearl Jephcott was a notable exception to this tradition. A full critical assessment of her work – which was carried out in some isolation from the late 1940s to the early 1960s – has yet to be done. However Jephcott was neither an anthropologist nor a sociologist and her work, strongly influenced by the tradition of social observation veers towards being over-descriptive, with her own presence, her values and her methodological procedures unexamined.⁴)

My own work in this field steered clear of moral judgement

and instead listened to the girls' own accounts of their perception of the world of school, the home and the family and the pressures these institutions put on them to adhere to normative gender and class expectations. This work had the positive effect of prompting a series of further investigations by other women sociologists and social psychologists. Suddenly the complete absence of interest in girls in a vast range of academic studies could no longer be ignored. Anne Campbell had already embarked on her pioneering work on female delinquency and Carol Smart had just published a more wide-ranging study of women and crime.⁵ In Sue Lees, *Losing Out: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls*, the way in which the sexual double standard effects the outlooks and the experience of a group of North London schoolgirls is explored in depth, in such a way as both to refute and refine some of my own ideas and in Chris Griffin's, *Invisible Girls*, there is a carefully constructed and methodologically precise attempt to track a group of Birmingham school-leavers through from school to work.⁶

The problem which remains in this field and one which I experienced but failed to come to grips with was the choice between aspiring towards an interactive mode of research where a great deal depends on the quality of the relationship between the subjects and the researcher, or opting instead for a more investigative approach where the mode of research is more impersonal, where the subjects remain more or less anonymous respondents, where the procedure involves structured interviews supplemented with often short periods of observation and the whole process takes on a more documentary character. In practice it is the former which has produced the most 'classic' and most widely consulted and quoted works of sociology and the latter which has fed into what has come to be known as 'social research'. Constrained by my inexperience (as an MA student on a small budget with limited research time) I vacillated uneasily between the two.

In the second part of this volume my interest in lived experience is sustained and incorporated into a chapter on teenage mothers. Set once again in Birmingham this short study concluded my work carried out in the West Midlands. I have presented this work with less emphasis on the interactive mode. I wanted to concentrate instead on the way in which the material

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conditions in which these girls were living deeply determined the range of choices open to them and in effect presented early motherhood as the only real choice which coincided with the dominant expectations of gender in the context in which they had grown up. I attempt to show how for a group of twelve young women, early motherhood in a small and overlooked pocket of poverty in south Birmingham which was still, in the early 1980s, suffering the direct effects of the recession of the 1970s, was the first step in a process leading directly to the 'feminisation of poverty'. To these girls I was a neighbour and a young mother myself. However the class divide between us was too great to lead to anything more than an occasional and friendly relationship. As a result the work described in that chapter was by necessity not so much drawn on interviews, and prolonged social interaction as on 'chats' (they knew I was a researcher) and on observation. For these reasons I have omitted both my own voice and that of the girls themselves from this chapter.

It is a great pity that both ethnographic work and 'social research' have been the casualties of cut-backs in funding for social science research. The few graduate students there now are in sociology are being channelled towards policy-oriented research. This means that the whole tradition here and in the USA, which is an established part of the sociology undergraduate curriculum is not being renewed, updated or revised. Open-ended experiential research in the *Learning to Labour* tradition, and even community studies in the early tradition of John Rex or Wilmott and Young are in deep danger of dying out altogether.⁷

There are many subjects close to my own concerns which I would like to see studied in more depth. I would like to see a qualitative study of female drug-users; a comparative study of girls in single-sex schools with those in mixed-sex schools; an interactive study of girls as TV-viewers in relation to family life, and more research of this type which concentrated on race and ethnicity (an element which is unfortunately missing in my own work).

Without studies of this sort sociology remains a dry and unexciting subject given over either to empiricism and the presentation of social facts and statistics in the style of journals and publications like *Social Trends*, or to the development of broad structuralist accounts of the objective conditions of existence in

the UK today, or else to the long march of 'social theory'. In contrast, 'lived experience' studies in the late 1960s through to the mid-1970s made sociology an exciting and engaged discipline. These studies also created their own theoretical insights and produced their own theoretical paradigms. They represent an important and too easily neglected tradition.

The second key interest which emerges from the body of work presented in this collection focuses on popular culture. The intellectual legacy of this concept lies firmly within the cultural studies tradition marked out by Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. With the massive growth of media studies in the past fifteen years, it is now extremely difficult to mark out where the concern of media studies stops and where popular culture begins. As is often the case with such closely linked concepts, institutions define their area of interest against other competing institutions. Thus in the 1980s popular culture spanned the CCCS in Birmingham and the Open University's popular culture U203 course. Media studies, including the analysis of the texts and institutions of film and television, has been connected with *Screen* magazine and the British Film Institute's Education Department and following that, with a number of polytechnic courses up and down the country. Popular culture is by now difficult to define with any precision. It points to a set of practices or texts or activities frequently associated with the field of leisure and 'enjoyed' by large numbers of people. As a result the study of popular culture has been less exclusively concerned with texts and readings than has the study of film and television. It has had a more historical and a more interactive dimension than media studies and has been less influenced by structuralism and semiology.

In this sense the study of popular culture retains closer connections with sociology than might be imagined. Simon Frith's work on popular music is important in this context. It should also be remembered that much of Raymond Williams's work can also be seen as a sociology of culture.⁸ My earliest interest in this field developed out of a sociology of art and literature course which I followed as an undergraduate in the early 1970s at Glasgow University. The track we took moved through from the theoretical writings of Lukacs and Goldman to Brecht and Walter Benjamin, and to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's important 'Constituents Towards a Theory of the Media'.⁹ From this exposition of

the new possibilities opened up by the technology of the mass media, and from the idea of attempting to introduce radical ideas to a mass audience, it was possible to move towards more detailed studies of the mechanisms and attractions of popular culture.

At Birmingham this interest was developed further through Richard Hoggart's immensely influential *Uses of Literacy* which considered mass culture in all its complex relations to and with working-class culture.¹⁰ In the late 1980s the very term 'working-class culture' has an anachronistic ring about it, but in the mid-1970s when I first set about the task of analysing the girls' magazine, *Jackie*, it was this term which was uppermost in my own 'framing' vocabulary. In fact *Jackie's* readership in those days went well beyond those girls who could be described as working class. Class entered into my argument through the back door as it were. For working-class girls who did not receive the kind of encouragement which their middle-class counterparts (also *Jackie* readers) received in terms of academic achievement, jobs and economic independence, *Jackie's* message was doubly pernicious. It bound them to a future which evolved round finding, as soon as possible, and holding onto, 'a fella', since life without such a person was synonymous with failure.

As *Jackie* has moved down-market in the 1980s and *Just Seventeen* has taken its place as the most popular weekly magazine, important changes can be seen on the pages of the new girls' magazines. *Just Seventeen* has, as I argue at length in Chapter 6, almost completely abandoned the old commitment to romance and has replaced this with fashion, pop, problems and personal self-realisation. The self is at the heart of *Just Seventeen* and this self is more self-confident, more independent, more fun than her old *Jackie* equivalent. Boys and sex still play a major role in the landscape of teenage femininity but there is less sentiment, less romance and a greater degree of frankness and realism. *Just Seventeen* emphasises fun and excitement and remains as a result, firmly within the field of 'entertainment'. However, without compromising its commitment to femininity (and feminine consumerism) it also addresses a new kind of girl who is less obsessed by the presence or absence of a 'steady' and whose future is defined by a different tempo and a different set of interests from those found in *Jackie*.

The third and final concept which finds continual expression in this book is subculture. Aspects of subcultural experience, particularly music, have entered deeply into the texture of my own everyday life, and it may be apposite here to mention some of these.

There are two reasons why I have been so interested in subcultures: first, because they have always appeared to me (against the grain of cultural studies analysis) as popular aesthetic movements, or 'constellations' (to borrow the term from Raulet)¹¹ and second, because in a small way they have seemed to possess the capacity to change the direction of young people's lives, or at least to sharpen their focus by confirming some felt, but as yet unexpressed intent or desire. Subcultures are aesthetic movements whose raw materials are, by definition, 'popular', in that they are drawn from the world of the popular mass media. It is not necessary to have an education in the *avant garde* or to know the history of surrealism to enjoy the Sex Pistols or to recognise the influence of Vivienne Westwood's fashion. This kind of knowledge (of pop music or fashion images) is relatively easy to come by and very different from the knowledge of the high arts or the literary canon found in the academy. At school and then later at university I was introduced to these 'high culture' forms and I remember being overwhelmed by French new wave cinema, by writers as diverse as Faulkner and Camus, Samuel Richardson and Nathaniel Hawthorne, by Brecht and by James Joyce. Reading these kinds of novels and becoming familiar with European art cinema was far removed from the culture in which I had grown up. To embrace one I had to battle against the other. In contrast, however, fashion, style and music of the type associated with youth subcultures and with the world of pop consumerism, were quite permissible. These were in one sense in conflict with the kind of values represented by my family and the lower middle-class Catholic culture in which I lived. (Some pop or rock music was rebellious and overtly sexual, some fashion images were too extreme.) Yet, because they were popular, because these images and sounds were products of the mass media they also possessed a legitimacy. Listening to pop or to r'n'b late at night on the radio was a much less 'foreign' experience than tuning into Radio Three and listening to Debussy, just

as flicking through *Vogue* was more 'normal' than going to the Glasgow Art galleries to whizz past the Whistlers.

The kind of pop, fashion and style which emerged from the subcultures of the 1960s, from Mod to hippy, therefore, played a kind of intermediary and directive role. They brought together widely available and – in lower middle-class terms – culturally acceptable items such as mini-skirts and make-up and certain kinds of hair-style, with a set of creative self-expressive forms, particularly music and dance. They celebrated the popular while simultaneously looking 'up' towards the arts. Mod culture (in relation to which I could only claim to be a bystander) made black soul music available in the context of 'teenage nightlife', celebrating it as the sound of the city. A few years later, when the hippie underground emerged, its overlap with the cultural *avante garde* was self-evident. This subculture meant poetry readings, arts labs, literature and drama as well as hair-styles (again), drugs and long flowing cheesecloth skirts.

By the time punk emerged I was living in Birmingham and six months pregnant. In fashion terms it was not the best time to be expecting a baby. But soon I was able to return to my favourite pastime of gigs and live concerts. From then on my academic interests merged completely with my night-time leisure. The Birmingham Centre faded into the background as a new set of interactions between left and feminist students, punk musicians, film makers, photographers and others emerged. Rock Against Racism brought visiting bands to the weekly gigs which grew up around the Au Pairs, UB 40, Rankin' Roger, and the various Birmingham reggae outfits. Dick Hebdige was an occasional doorman at the wonderful Shoop disco; Paul Gilroy dj-ed at Digbeth City Hall; Talking Heads played at Barbarellas, The Gang of Four played the Odeon and Ian Curtis with Joy Division appeared at the Rum Runner on the Hagley Road.

All this took place within the embrace of punk. Long after the moment of punk style had passed, a wider subcultural field had installed itself in the dreary blighted heartland of the West Midlands producing a sense of a 'continuous present'. This was so forceful and so captivating that it gathered people up in an endless whirl of events, which blocked out the depressed economic present by creating a local utopia, a Birmingham bohemia.

Some of the contents of this volume I have already mentioned.

The others need only a few brief words of introduction. The first essay, *Girls and Subcultures* was co-written with Jenny Garber within months of our arrival as graduate students in Birmingham. Being plunged in at the deep end was both daunting and exciting. The piece was intended as a kind of running commentary on the absence of girls in the work on subcultures which was being published in the Centre and elsewhere at that time. In a sense it tried to do too much in one go. The aim was both to complement and extend, and at the same time to be a critique of what later came to be known as subcultural theory, which was best summarised in the long introduction to *Resistance Through Rituals*.¹² Alongside this critical aim there was also an attempt to put things right by writing in that history 'Where were/are the girls?', but all that was possible at that moment, under constraints of time, was a brief, speculative sketch. Perhaps the important thing about *Girls and Subcultures* (first published in 1977) was that it turned away from subcultures to the terrain of domestic life, arguing that if we wanted to know about teenage femininity or about female youth culture, this was where we might begin.

This chapter is followed by an account of the ethnographic work which I then went on to do in order to pursue this aim of knowing something more about the ordinary everyday lives of working-class teenage girls. *Working-Class Girls* (first published in 1979) argues that the culture of femininity which is made available to girls through the intimate world of magazines can be used by girls as a means of creating their own space in the school, the youth club or even in the home. At the same time, despite this small capacity for signalling discontent or dissatisfaction with those institutions and their expectations of what teenage working-class girls should be like, they none the less serve to secure girls even tighter to an unchanging message. This is one which stresses the importance of finding a steady boyfriend and potential husband at all cost and preferably as soon as possible. The future and the entire economic well-being of the girl depends on this. While the girls in this small study do indeed draw on these items and cultural commodities (make-up, magazines, fashion) to distance themselves from the regime of the school or from the organised activities of the youth club – or even to oppose them – none of the girls envisage a life for

themselves which in any way departs from the prescribed expectations of becoming a wife and mother who is financially dependent on her husband. A good job for these girls was one which would help them to pave the way to setting up home.

This chapter is followed by a piece (*The Politics of Feminist Research*) which emerged from a series of debates in feminism on the way that feminist research is or should be conducted when it involves using human subjects (in this case teenage girls) as the source for data. It was written (and published in 1982) partly in defence of the kind of work I had been doing, partly in defence of the sociological procedures of participant observation, and partly as an attempt to justify the role of the researcher as someone who can represent groups of often powerless people by describing and offering an explanation of the material conditions and constraints within which they are forced to live. The argument which gained ground in feminist circles at that time was that research of this sort should be directed back towards the subjects so that they might gain something concrete from it. While admirable in intent, I argue that this is often neither practical nor possible. The results, for example, of my study of teenage mothers (Chapter 8) could hardly have been of direct use to those girls who were suffering from so many deprivations and disadvantages as to be barely able to cope from one day to the next, never mind take part in academic exchanges. This fact should not, however, invalidate such research projects. The aim of this kind of research is precisely to feed into wider discussions which can lead to changes in public policy. Research can help to make a kind of 'clamour' which in turn can be used to challenge widespread misconceptions (e.g. 'welfare mothers are scroungers').

'Settling the Accounts with Subcultures' was published in 1982 in *Screen Education* and it represented a continuation of the debate which emerged from my earlier critique of subcultural writing (found here in Chapter 1). The focus in this instance was on the two most influential books which had recently appeared in the field – Willis's *Learning to Labour* and Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.¹³ In retrospect it seems to me that in my eagerness to argue the feminist case I failed perhaps to remind the reader of the great importance of these volumes and the extent to which they had both thoroughly influenced and